

## **Stranger Things Season 3 by make-your-own-world**

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**Summary:** My version of a Stranger Things Season 3, a sequel to my version of Stranger Things Season 2. Mileven, Lumax, Hopper/Joyce.

\*\*ST2 was started before canon ST2 came out\*\* ON HIATUS

## 1. The Picture

The city would be loud and intimidating to anyone, but the two girls have faced a lot more than some creeping guys. They clench each other's hands tighter, regardless of the fact that a week ago they were at each other's throats and *literally* trying to kill the other.

Both girls wear dark clothes and have dark hair but their skin is as pale cream so they pull their hoods over their faces and over their hands. The first girl pulls the second along as the second stumbles from exhaustion. The first girl is tired, too, but years of ignoring discomfort allows her to pretend as if her feet don't ache from the inside out.

The first girl has been here before, so a little more confidence washes over face like neon lights when she sees the warehouse. Her creased forehead smooths for the first time in a week and she straightens, the responsibility of her friend's safety rolling off her back.

"This is it?" the second girl mutters, her lip curling under the hood.

The first girl nods simply, not one for using many words except around certain people. She's about to see one of them and her hand tightens on her friend's.

"Does she know we're coming?"

She squeezes the second girl's hand again.

"Are the others coming?"

*Squeeze.*

"I thought you killed it."

The first girl sighs and speaks for the first time, her voice raw and wavering as it rolls off her tongue, throat sore, "I hurt it. Really bad. And you and me and her made... what happen happen..." she pauses for a second to take a breath when it feels like her chest is being run over by a truck. "When we hurt it. But we need everyone to kill it and seal it in."

"She stayed back to watch over them, though, right?"

"She'll call us back when it's time," the first girl says quietly, tugging the hood off her head to reveal curly brown hair barely pulled back into a bun, smaller strands framing her face like a halo. "Until then we kill the people who started this."

"We could do it with more help," the second girl presses, an argument she's started more than a couple times, and pulls back her own hood. Dark, ravenette hair flows over her shoulders and is tucked into the back of her sweatshirt.

The first girl shakes her head. "I don't want them hurt."

"Oh, and you want *me* hurt?" The two of them have practically memorized this argument by now.

"You're different," the first girl murmurs. "You can protect yourself."

"You don't need me," the second girl huffs, straying off the path of the normal conversation. "You opened it and let it out. You closed it and hurt it, really bad. And that was all without us."

"It's probably gotta be me," the first girl nods, raising her hand to knock on the door. "But you guys gotta help me."

Nearly the second she knocks the door swings open, and a whole group of people wearing clown masks blinks down at the pair until the leader speaks up.

*"Finally."*

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Mike wakes up straight out of a nightmare.

He can't quite remember what it's about, *can* remember ash floating in the air and a dog barking, someone counting and getting to the number thirteen before stopping, but that's it. It's not surprising, actually, considering recent events. He doesn't want to say he's used to it, but...

He's used to it.

"Mike!" Karen yells up the stairs. "Come on, you're going to be late and you've got to bike to school today because I can't drive you if you're late!"

"Coming!" Mike shouts back, shaking his shaggy hair like a wet dog. He really needs to get it cut, or soon he's going to look like a girl. He's seen one or two girls with this hairstyle before, but he can't recall their names. It's not like anyone goes out of their way to talk with the party.

Mike drags a hand down his face and stumbles to the bathroom, gripping the sides of the sink and looking into the mirror intently. He's got scrapes on his face he can't quite remember the origin of, but he supposes he must have gotten them while he was helping to build that treehouse for Holly.

Mike huffs out a laugh and splashes water on his face. Jeez, that project had been such a trip. Nearly everyone else had been too busy to help so he'd had to build the whole thing himself, except for when Holly helped to fetch him objects strictly under five pounds. Mike's little sister's in that age where she's too cocky to believe she should be doing any heavy lifting. She had just painted the house and at one point, upended a bottle of spare paint over Mike's head.

A rock hits Mike's window with a sharp clatter and Mike turns with a yelp and a curse. Lucas is standing underneath his window, tossing a pebble back and forth between his hands.

"Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair," Lucas calls up, grinning.

Mike flips him the bird. "Happy Halloween. Is it time to go already?"

"Nah, I'm early. Just wanted to mess with you," Lucas admits. The shit-eating grin still hasn't left his face. "I can't believe Halloween's on a *Monday*."

"Dude, you could have broken my window. How big was that fucking pebble?"

"You're overreacting. Get dressed and try not to drool during history again!"

"Fuck off, Lucas!" Mike calls back down lightly before slamming his window down and grabbing newly washed clothes at random from a pile he has yet to fold.

Nancy is on the phone when he walks down the hallway, barely acknowledging his existence, before returning to arguing with another one of her school friends. Something crashes in Holly's room.

Mike stops to look at his reflection in the mirror. When he blinks, a cloud passes over his eyes, blurring the mirror. He blinks furiously, rubbing at his eyes, trying to get the dried-out tear secretion out.

"Mom!" Nancy screams as Mike pounds down the stairs. "Mom, what are we doing on Sunday?"

A stack of papers on the table remind Mike that he had only meant to take a short nap yesterday before doing his homework. He cusses softly, but Karen appears behind him and cuffs the back of his head nonetheless.

"Nothing, apart from church!" Karen yells back.

Holly stumbles down the stairs in overalls and her hair in pigtails that she tugs at. She's been wheedling for Karen to braid her hair, but it's still too wispy for that to happen. Holly doesn't really understand that, though, and has started to try and get Mike to braid her hair, even though he has no idea how. Karen grabs Holly and pulls her into the entrance hallway to pull on her coat.

Mike grabs an Eggo. At the same time, his throat tickles and he lets out a harsh bark-cough that sounds more like he's choking than anything else.

"Michael!" Karen shouts. "Are you all right?" She appears in the room with her hands on her hips, a brush in one of them. Holly follows after her, darting around her mother despite the wider backpack she's wearing, and snags another Eggo out of the fridge and eating it cold.

Mike cringes when he sees the brush and shoves the rest of the waffle in his mouth, darting out of the kitchen the same time he swallows the rest of the waffle, resulting in indigestion. Mike pounds on his

chest, swallowing multiple times, before the discomfort passes. That brief moment of weakness allows Karen to catch up with him and she nearly scalps him while trying to pull a comb through Mike's hair.

Lucas starts to knock on the door.

"Coming!" Mike shouts, ducking away from his mother, who sighs heavily.

"Mike, remember, if you yell at any of your teachers again today you won't be going out with your friends, all right?"

There's another crash above his head, accompanied by Ted cursing loudly, but thankfully takes Karen's attention off of him. Mike winces and instinctively looks at Holly, but she doesn't seem to have heard it and is still happily enjoying her frozen Eggo. *He* thinks it's disgusting, but one of his friends eats them any way they can. Mike can't remember exactly who it is. It's probably Max; she's not picky.

Mike nearly slips on the slick tile floor as he rushes back into the kitchen to get his papers. Holly is rummaging through them with sticky fingers.

"Gimme," Mike snaps and snatches them. Holly lets out a sound of protest but doesn't complain too much. Her fingers left orange stains on the papers from her juice.

Lucas pounds on the door again.

"I need a pencil!" Nancy shrieks, standing in the doorway with her messenger bag draped over her shoulder. Mike reaches up to where one is sticking out of her frazzled hair and races out the door, leaving his hectic house behind. Lucas and Dustin are waiting for him, snickering as they hear Nancy's self-righteous screeches inside the house, screaming Mike's name and promising revenge.

"It's not like there aren't other pencils in the world," Mike grumbles, balancing his Science binder on his handlebars and putting one hand on the papers so they don't blow away.

When he sees that Lucas is wearing a Green Lantern shirt and that Dustin is wearing a Batman shirt, he remembers that he was

supposed to wear his Spider-man shirt. Oh well. Too late now.

"Where's your costume?" Lucas asks.

Mike grimaces. "Forgot it. I'll put it on for trick-or-treating."

"Dude, you didn't do the study guide?" Dustin asks as they start pedaling, Mike trying to bike and write at the same time. If he didn't have to perform this trick so many times he might crash and fall. Thank goodness for summer, when he could perfect the art of pedaling without using his hands to steer.

"No, I did, I just wanted to do it again," Mike says sarcastically. "Practice makes perfect, Dustin!" He taps the side of his head mockingly.

"You're too close," Lucas says vaguely to Mike before striking up an argument with Dustin.

Mike glances up just enough to see himself only about a centimeter from someone's car, almost scraping it as he breezes by. He drifts away from it, swerving away and then back, scribbling out an answer quickly, glancing up and making sure he's good before writing out a longer answer.

"How can an extinction event be negative for a species?" Mike reads aloud, snickering. "You mean, apart from them going *extinct*?"

Lucas snorts.

"I dare you to write that down," Dustin goads. Last year their Science teacher, Mr. Clarke, would have laughed and given Mike full points if he had written that on a study guide, but this year, Mike has already pissed off most of his teachers, Mrs. Dunbrough especially, by cussing them out. It's not his fault; they're really very dull.

A feeling creeps over Mike, something like nostalgia, and he shoves it away. Not many people are as generously endowed with brains as he and his friends. He doesn't miss something, except for maybe the Yoda toy Holly had stolen to bring to school and had brought back charred. Mike still doesn't know how she did it.

"Mrs. Dunbrough will probably fail me out of spite anyways, so what the hell," Mike shrugs and writes it down.

"Too close again," Lucas says anxiously. Mike swerves away quickly; he was about to run point-blank into a red, dusty van.

"Ah, school," Dustin sighs. "A lovely place full of bloodthirsty teenagers. Just what I wanted!" Mike nods meaningfully and stuffs his now-completed study guide into his backpack, not caring where it ends up.

"Mrs. Dunbrough, here we come," Dustin says mournfully, reaching into his pocket and pulling out an M&M. He pops it into his mouth, oblivious to Mike and Lucas exchanging exasperated glances. "I can truly say I've looked into the face of Satan—"

"Oh my gosh, Dustin, she's not that bad!" Will exclaims, popping up at Mike's elbow as if from the ground.

"That's because she likes you," Lucas mutters.

"Every teacher likes Will," Mike sighs mournfully, "when it's obvious he's planning a coup. They should love me instead."

Dustin clasps his hands together and bats his eyes. "Oh, yes, Mike, what a good student you are—oh, and what's that? You're cursing me out again? How sweet!"

"It's 'cause they're all stupid," Mike mutters, casting his gaze at the ground.

"It's 'cause you have zero patience," Lucas corrects.

The four enter the classroom, where their other friend is supposed to be waiting. "Where is she?" Mike asks as he puts his study guide in Mrs. Dunbrough's basket.

"The teacher?" Dustin asks for clarification.

"Yeah, Dustin, I was *so* worried about our dear Science teacher's wheareabouts," Mike rolls his eyes again and twists around, saying, "No, I'm worried about—" his elbow catches on his textbook and it

thunks to the floor. Mike sighs with exasperation.

Will pipes up, "I heard she got in trouble with Hopper, but that might not be right."

Mike shrugs at that. Hopper couldn't get *very* mad at her, so he's not worried.

The bell rings its first warning and several students start to trickle in, but it's hardly their whole class, which isn't unusual. Most kids wait until just before the third bell, which is the last one. Mike wouldn't dream of doing that because he would probably get to the classroom two minutes before the bell and that would be the day Mrs. Dunbrough would declare that for her class, the second bell is the final bell. Seriously, call her a bitch *one time* and she has it out for him the rest of the school year! All of Mike's other teachers have gotten past his outbursts in the beginning of the school year, but some of them might even want them back because now all Mike does in class is stare out the windows and grunt. At least with the yelling you could tell he was paying attention and invested.

*Remember, Mike tells himself, no matter what she says or does, you can't yell at her. Ignore her. Completely.*

None of Mike's friends would understand the aching urge to leave school and get out, away. They're perfectly happy right where they are, or at least that's what they appear to feel. Mike wishes that they knew what he felt, the ache in his stomach that clenches sometimes and forces words up his throat like vomit, the nostalgic feeling for something. Mike wants *something* and it's infuriating not to know what he himself wants.

Will kicks Mike's chair like he can tell his friend is getting unsettled, like he could sense it somehow. Mike berates himself; he probably just stiffened and Will saw it, why'd he have to use the word *sense*; it implies something supernatural or strange when—

"Good morning!" Mrs. Dunbrough barks out her usual greeting, a cheerful exclamation that sounds like an insult when coming out of her shockingly red lips. Her eyes sweep over the class once, twice, three times to take attendance. Mike's lips twitch when he remembers

some of the more outrageous theories the party had come up with to explain how the Witch remembers her seating chart for every class without fail. Will said a photographic memory, Dustin said photographic memory but in order to get that photographic memory she made a deal with a demon, and so on. "Has everyone turned in their study guides?"

Is it just Mike's imagination, or does she narrow her eyes in his direction? Seriously, she's been holding this grudge for *way* too long.

"Remember, your study guides are for a grade, so any smart-aleck answers will count against you." Now Mike is *sure* that Mrs. Dunbrough is glaring at him. Oh well, too late now to change the answers that had been sarcastic. "You have ten minutes to review, starting..." She turns over the old-fashioned hourglass on her desk rather than a timer or just using the clock. "Now!"

Mike spares the notes in his binder a disgusted look before turning around to talk with his friends once more.

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Mike watches his hand as he taps his fingers on the table, chin propped up with the other hand. If he moves his fingers fast enough, his skin almost looks like it's rippling, the thin bones of his fingers making a hypnotizing pattern that he just can't tear his eyes away from.

"Mr. Wheeler!"

Mike's elbow slips off the desk and he clips his chin on the hard surface before popping up to look innocently at Mrs. Dunbrough.

*What, is it still first period?*

"Yes, Mrs. Dunbrough?" Mike asks innocently, blushing when he hears his friends snickering behind him. He had hoped to just doze through the entire school day, lazily drifting from class to class and making sure not to even be provoked by teachers, but he's not even a quarter of the way done with the day.

*Damn.*

"Are you finished with your test yet, Mr. Wheeler?" the Witch inquires coldly, peering over thin spectacles. Come to think of it, the Witch meets every criteria for 'strict teacher' tenfold. Mike tries to imagine her doing anything other than bothering him at school and can't.

"Yeah, I'm done," Mike says easily, handing over the test where the only thing he wrote was his name. Maybe if one of his friends could easily calm him down he wouldn't get into so much trouble, but all they do is egg him on or rile him up.

The Witch spares him a look, exasperated or disappointed or tired, but doesn't press it too much. "All right, time for notes!"

The whole class groans. Last year they could use the whole period for their tests, and the faster test-takers had loved being able to relax before another class. Now the Witch just likes to torture them. Thankfully—or at least for the people behind on homework—Mike loves to take as long as possible while taking the tests.

Mrs. Dunbrough starts handing out note papers and Mike immediately starts folding them up into paper airplanes.

When the bell rings, Mike jumps up and tries to sprint out of the classroom, not wanting to spend any more time with the Witch than he has to because she's the teacher that annoys him the most. Right before his feet are in the hallway, she calls his name and he can't pretend he didn't hear her because her voice was *loud*.

Will spares him a sympathetic look as the party exits the room, Lucas and Dustin rapidly disappearing down the hall, but Will waits at the door for Mike and checks his watch purposefully.

Mike approaches the Witch with heavy feet as she pins him into her gravitational pull with her laser eyes. Mike really needs to write her into one of the party's campaigns as a monster, right after he finishes the draft about that one monster. He has no idea why he started writing about a Shadow Monster, especially when the party would need a Mage to defeat it and their Mage isn't ready to play yet.

"Mr. Wheeler, I researched your school records and found that last

year you seemed to be struggling just as you are now," the Witch says, for once her voice not harsh and clipped but soft and smooth. Does she have to make herself talk harsher for school?

Mike shrugs, picking at the hem of his shirt. Last year was a blur. He had been so high-strung during Will's disappearance that he'd gotten himself sick afterwards and had weird hallucinations for a day or two but he'd been fine afterwards. It had been anger that someone had tried to hurt his friend that had kept him lashing out for nearly a whole year, then from Christmas and through the whole summer he'd been fine, probably because there'd been no pressure from school to stress him out.

"I just want to know... are there home problems I should know about?"

Mike hunches his shoulders and lets his long hair fall into his eyes, flicking it back with irritation, letting it fall back, rubbing the pads of his fingers together. He doesn't want Mrs. Dunbrough to think he's having home problems. He doesn't want her to take it easy on him. He wants to know that she gets mad at him because she thinks he's an asshole. He doesn't want her to make him feel bad that she feels bad for him, he doesn't want the pressure building behind his eyes.

"If I wanted to deal with a bitch, I would have gotten a dog," Mike snaps, rubbing at his eyes furiously. "Go to hell."

"Mr. Wheeler," the Witch calls after him, still using the voice that puts him off his guard and makes him feel like he missed a step down the stairs.

Mike storms out of the classroom, not knowing why, exactly, he's crying, only that he feels broken because he should be able to feel something but he can't, only anger. He's only angry. He should be grateful that Will's following after him, he should be worried about missing his class, he should be mad at himself for cursing at a teacher, he should be hoping that the Witch won't call his parents.

"Mike!" Will yells after him.

Mike snaps, "*What?*" but doesn't take his eyes off the wall. He doesn't

want Will to see him crying.

"Mike, are you all right?" His smaller friend approaches him and Mike's grateful he doesn't say anything about how he rubs furiously at his eyes.

"I'm fine, just tired," Mike nods and it's true. He just wants to go home and sleep until it's time to go out with his friends. "Kind of starting the day off wrong, aren't I?" He huffs out a bitter half-laugh.

Will joins him in staring at the wall. Mike feels like they share a secret only he doesn't know what the secret is.

Will's fingers trace over the bullet holes in the wall—

*Screaming, running*

—while saying, "Can I talk to you?"

"Can it wait?" Mike glances at his watch. He doesn't want to go to his class but he doesn't want to be cornered to talk about *feelings*.

"Wanna go to the park?" Will asks instead of answering.

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When Mike gets home that evening, his mother doesn't scream at him right away, which leads him to believe there's still hope and goodness in this world. When he walks into the kitchen, braced for the shrieks, she just smiles at him and he relaxes. Thank God.

He grabs two of the cookies on the counter and races up the stairs to his room, slamming it so hard something crashes in his closet. After tugging on his Spider-man shirt, he pulls his closet door open and breathes in the slightly musky scent. One of the shoeboxes filled with pointless mementos had crashed, spreading pictures over the floor and the pile of dirty laundry.

Mike curses under his breath and tries to sweep up the pictures with one wave of his hands, but one bends and then springs upwards before fluttering through the air and onto the ground. Mike's eyebrows furrow when he sees the subject of the picture: a girl with curly brown hair, her back to the picture taker.

It must be Nancy's, accidentally swept up into his mess, although no one in Mike's family apart from Karen ever touches the shoeboxes.

Mike stuffs it in his pocket to give to Nancy and finishes cleaning up the mess.

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"Trick or Treat!"

So far they've gotten to five houses that'd judged them for dressing up and they've only been trick-or-treating for twenty minutes. They've learned to brush it off, though.

"—I mean, would they rather we be partying and getting roaring drunk?" Lucas grumbles as they turn their backs on yet another house. "Where is she, anyway?"

"We're going to meet her at the store; Hopper's dropping her off," Dustin supplies. Lucas has asked the same question no less than six times in the entirety of their trick-or-treating session.

Mike tries to grab a candy from Will's bag and the smaller boy pushes him. Mike stumbles, laughing, and Will catches a glimpse of the picture that Mike had forgotten to ask his sister about. In the dimming light, it looks as if Will gets significantly paler.

"What's that?" he asks, pointing at the photo.

Mike holds it up to reflect the dying sunbeams and shrugs, peering at it. He's probably seen the girl around before; she looks a little familiar and's got the hairstyle he's currently sporting. He can't see much of her apart from the sweatshirt and jeans she's wearing, except for the fact that she's barefoot.

Will flips it over to look at the back. Mike peers at the messy writing—similar to his own, in fact—before shrugging and flicking it between his fingers in Will's direction. "Never heard of her. Must be one of Nancy's friends."

Will fumbles to catch the photo and examines it. He flips it over as well.

On the back are words that he can distinctly remember his friend scrawling, still blushing a bit and hair completely windblown: *El, First Day of School.*

## 2. The Baby

### ONE WEEK EARLIER

"Very good, Elle!" Mr. Clarke grins warmly at El, who blinks at him and turns around. Mike, being prompted, grins at her too, and at that El's mouth twitches.

Mike's glad during every one of El's sessions with Mr. Clarke that her hair is brown and curly, not only because it looks good, but because it looks different enough from the wig Mr. Clarke had first met El in that he doesn't think she's Mike's cousin.

As El and Mr. Clarke continue her lesson, Mike is slowly dogging through his homework. Whenever he has a question he can ask the amicable teacher, and Mr. Clarke is the only teacher in the world who would spend every free hour at the cabin to help a child catch up on years' worth of school. The story they'd told him was vague on purpose; varying details from Joyce, Hopper, and Mike about human experiments and escaping human trafficking in New York. El's input—a solemn "Bad men"—only backed up their story but everyone knows that Mr. Clarke knows that some parts of the story have been left out. Namely, El's superpowers, the Upside Down, and the Demogorgon.

It's been eleven months since all of that madness has stopped; eleven months *exactly* in exactly one week.

El still wakes up screaming most nights and Will's still quiet. She's always cold and scared of the dark and jumps at loud noises.

She also has her own radio, her own bike, and knows how to braid hair (she braids Holly's all the time). Hopper gave her an instant camera for her birthday, the day the boys found her in the woods, and she's begun to play D&D with the rest of the party as long as Mike holds her hand under the table. She's even watched Star Wars and is in all the same classes as Mike in school.

Mike smiles absently when he sees that El's hidden another paper in his folder. The moment she learned to draw, she'd started to sketch

everything: Eggos, the cabin, Hopper, a stack of books on the table. The first few drawings had, for lack of a better word, sucked, but after countless hours under Will's careful tutelage, she's slowly growing to rival him in skill. Her last drawing of Skipper, the cabin's third occupant and an energetic puppy, had looked exactly like him.

This drawing is of El's bed. On the back, she's comprised the usual list of Yes and No. Under Yes is Mike, Mr. Clarke, Skipper, Eggos, Hopper, English class, and Max.

Mike's eyebrows raise when he reads that. At best, El has grudgingly accepted the redhead's role in the group. At worst, she's been trying to severely harm her, although no one can exactly prove it. Even though Mike knows he should be telling her to stop, he's impressed that she's precise enough with her powers to make the accidents not suspicious at all. Maybe now she's finally warming up to the redhead.

Under the No section is Mrs. Dunbrough, cats, soda, coffee, and Skittles.

Mike's friends tease *him* for being obsessed with El, but never once has she forgotten to include him in her lists, and always under the Yes section.

The thought brings a stupid grin to Mike's lips.

He loves finding El's papers. He's got them in a box under his bed, and when that became full, has started taping them up around his walls.

The clock turns to six o'clock. Mike's watch starts going off.

"You did great, Elle," Mr. Clarke says warmly, twinkling at the small girl.

El responds in a small voice, "Thank you."

Both males freeze. That's the first time El's spoken of her own volition to the teacher, apart from when she has to repeat words to signal she doesn't know what they mean.

Mr. Clarke recovers first to smile and nod. "Anytime." He exits the

cabin swiftly, nodding to Mike as he leaves. The two teens only have fifteen minutes until the Sheriff gets back. Neither have said anything to Mr. Clarke about it but he knew anyways and has made sure to finish fifteen minutes early ever since the first lesson.

Mike keeps his eyes on his homework—he really does need to work—but a smile creeps over his face again, a blush rising up his neck and onto his cheeks as he feels El's eyes on him.

The girl shifts impatiently; both kids waiting for the other to make a move.

Mike shakes his head slightly, the smile growing wider, until El sighs loudly and climbs onto the couch, sliding one knee up and then the other, tucking them under her body.

"Did you hear me reading?" El asks shyly, tucking a curl behind her ear only for it to spring forward again.

"You did very good," Mike assures her, his smile reaching the 'blinding' setting, and he pushes the books off his lap so El can sit nearer to him. She flinches at the loud noise but then slithers forward softly until she's tucked under Mike's arm. As always, heat spreads out from the places she touches him.

"I saw Elle today," she confesses, her eyes sparkling. Mike hums, his fingers running through her soft curls gently.

"In person?"

El shakes her head. "No time," she explains. On weekdays, she's either at school or with Mr. Clarke. It's only on the weekends she's allowed to relax, so half the time she'll watch Baby Elle or Mike with her powers while on the bus.

Mike leans forwards and inhales her scent. Minty-fresh. Her curls ruffle as he exhales. "How's Little Elle doing?"

"She's got curls, like me, but they're yellow. Our eyes are the same, though!" El beams, her nose crinkling with delight. "She knew I was watching. She said my name!"

"Maybe she was just saying her own name," Mike suggests. No one else can tell when El's watching them, so there's almost no chance a baby would be able to sense El.

El shakes her head. "No, I could tell. I can hear the extra letters when Mr. Clarke says my name. Elle was saying *my* name."

Mike shrugs, running his fingers up and down her arm. To be honest, he can't hear a difference, but he's not going to argue with her, especially when it's (probably) because of that baby Max is under Yes.

"Max taught me how to fishtail-braid today," El informs Mike importantly. Maybe *that's* why.

"Wanna teach me?" Mike asks, already knowing her answer. El nods excitedly, sliding off the couch to sit on the floor inbetween his legs.

El is talking Mike through the braid when he catches a glimpse of the time on his watch. It's six-twenty.

"Hey, Hopper's late," he says, frowning.

As if on cue, the radio crackles to life. "Hey, El, Mike, did Mr. Clarke have to leave already?" Hopper's voice, tinny, can barely be heard. El turns up the volume with her powers, then taps Mike's hand with her pointer finger. Mike agreeably continues.

"Yeah," El says loudly.

Hopper sighs, making the radio crackle and hiss. The two teens wince. "I'm sorry I'm late, but there's a weird frost that's creeping over the crops on the outside of the town and I've got half a dozen farmers riding my ass about how it's some vandalism from teens. I'll be home in about thirty minutes, all right? Mike, are you good to stay with El?"

El shifts slightly, as always resentful of the idea that she needs to be protected, but keeps quiet. After all, protesting that she doesn't need a bodyguard might get Mike sent away, and that's the last thing she wants to happen.

"That's all right," Mike says agreeably, twisting a hairband on the end of the braid. "I've got nowhere else to be."

"Okay. El, Mike, you guys finish your homework, all right? Last thing I need is for Karen to start calling me up to complain about how I'm making Mike's grades drop. And dinner's in the fridge. And—"

"Bye, Dad," El says meaningfully.

"See you," Hopper replies. El gets up to manually turn the radio off. When she turns around, Mike's right behind her.

El squeaks. Mike swoops in to gently slot his lips against hers before pulling away and leading her into the kitchen.

"Did Hopper say tonight's lasagna?" Mike asks, pretending to be cool, but El can see the blush in his cheeks.

El nods and brushes a stray curl that had been too short to braid out of her face. "Joyce brought it over."

"When are you and Hop gonna move into Will's house?" Mike asks conversationally. He cuts two pieces of lasagna out of the casserole and shoves them into the microwave on paper plates.

El frowns thoughtfully and it wrinkles her nose. Mike has to force himself not to stare. "I've been helping to pack but they haven't agreed on who's going to pay the bills and that sort of things, I think."

"Where will you be sleeping?" The microwave beeps and Mike pulls the food out, wincing when he puts his hand under the hot food and it burns him. He makes it to the table in record time. The smell of food must finally rouse Skipper from his nap because he bursts from El's room barking loudly.

El shrugs delicately, bracing herself for Skipper's inevitable attack. "I think Hopper will build a new room, but until then I'll either be sharing with Will or he'll share with Jonathan. Or I could just sleep on the couch." Skipper slides into the kitchen, nails clicking on tile floor, and crashes into the fridge with his momentum before turning around and attempting to jump into El's lap.

Mike's face twists at that. "You could sleep at my house," he suggests hopefully. They both already know Karen wouldn't allow it.

El laughs, trying to push Skip down with one hand. "I'll sleep at your house tomorrow, right?"

Mike beams. "Yeah! Did I tell you about the campaign yet?"

"No, and I want it to be a surprise," El insists. "Is the fort still up?"

At that, Mike scoffs, offended. "Like I would take it down."

El blushes.

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*Whistling.*

*"Who the hell is El?"*

*Black, brown eyes, black again*

*"You just didn't want to look. You didn't want to see the truth."*

*Whistling, whistling, whistling*

*"What is she doing here?"*

*The lungs rattle as they breathe*

*Two voices screaming*

*"My fault."*

*Hands clenched together under the table*

*"For the best."*

*Sobbing, choking*

*"I won't!"*

*Boxes, boxes, under the boxes and the floor there's another one—*

*"You don't have a choice."*

*Drip. Drip. Drip.*

*Purple, green, blue skin.*

*"Anyone close to me."*

*A die, spinning on a point, and then it's gone through a black hole that's spreading out, out, out—*

*Should I stay or should I—*

*"GO!"*

---

As Dustin cracks yet another ridiculous joke under his breath, El and Mike exchange amused glances and Max rolls her eyes. Their new teacher, a young woman named Ms. Sarah Walker, snickers under her breath as she passes, her bracelets jangling.

"Ms. Walker!" Dustin cries. "Pick four numbers and I'll tell you if they're your lucky ones!"

Ms. Walker smiles brightly at him. "Um, let's see... one, eight, eleven, thirteen. How about them?"

Dustin turns his eyes up to the ceiling, mentally doing the math, before shaking his head. "Nope."

"How do you figure that?" the blonde asks, sidling closer to her pupil.

El stares at her, completely ignoring Mike's fingers tap-dancing on her hand.

"Those numbers aren't divisible by two," Dustin stutters. Lucas raises his eyebrows the slightest bit and shares a look with Max, who's watching a faint blush color Dustin's cheeks with an open mouth.

Mike has to stuff his fist into his mouth to stop himself from laughing. When the urge becomes too bad, he turns to look at El, who's glaring at her desk as if she's developed laser vision. Dustin

would probably have a fit if she did develop laser vision. He'd probably call her the real-life Supergirl.

Eventually Ms. Walker glides away to work with some other students, the faint smell of lemon the only evidence she'd ever been there—the only evidence apart from a red-cheeked Dustin vulnerable to an attack from three of his best friends. Max beats the rest of them to it, exclaiming, "Dude!"

"What?" Dustin asks defensively.

Lucas can't hold in his laughter anymore. Tears are streaming down his face as he chokes out, "You like our teacher!"

"I do not!" Dustin exclaims louder than his friends, attracting weird looks to the group that quickly flit away when El meets their gazes with her own blank one.

No one really knows where she came from before showing up one day wearing overalls and holding Mike Wheeler's hand—the boy who'd spent the first half of the school year cussing out the teachers—claiming to be Chief Jim Hopper's daughter, which is scary enough in itself, but that coupled with the fact that Troy and his gang have completely left the party alone once she arrived?

Half the school's convinced *she* was the one that broke his arm last year, especially because he wouldn't let anyone know how he did it (they don't know how right they are) and the other half is pretty sure that she's got some nefarious past like drug dealing or murder.

Well, it's not drug dealing or murder but it's certainly a nefarious past.

"I do not," Dustin repeats, quieter this time. but still loud enough for Ms. Walker to glance over at them with curiosity.

"Back to work," she calls and the students all duck their heads quickly.

---

The bell rings and everyone jumps to their feet, slinging their bags over their shoulders hastily. Mike makes a beeline for the door,

reaching behind him for El's hand but she never takes it. He turns around and she's making her way delicately to Ms. Walker's desk.

"El?" he questions, ignoring the disgruntled students having to walk around him.

"I'll be right there," she says distractedly, not looking away from their teacher. Ms. Walker looks up from a paper she's grading and looks at El before getting up and walking to the door.

"I'll see you in two days, Mr. Wheeler," she says firmly and closes the door on his face.

---

El exits the room with shaking fingers and a white face. She's half-hoping that Mike will have waited for her out in the hall, but she's also half-hoping he's in the AV room. He would be able to see how scared she is immediately.

A stray student sprints by her just as the bell rings. El jumps. The student looks back at her, a little confused as to why she's not in either a classroom or the cafeteria, but the stranger's face is blank and their eyes are black.

El's fake smile freezes on her face as she waves them off. The student rolls their black eyes before stalking away.

When her foot falls on the ground, the world flickers for a moment. A whine starts building in El's ears and she presses at her eyes with the heels of her hands viciously. When she opens them, she's surrounded with black.

It's not the black of the Nowhere. She knows the Nowhere; she created it, discovered it. She knows it like she knows the back of her hand but this isn't it.

This isn't like regular darkness either; it doesn't press her eyes open. This isn't the Nowhere, which is just nothing, an absence of anything, where she is the only thing.

The whine gets louder, screeching like a broken record at times, and El winces and rubs at her eyebrow.

This darkness surrounds her but doesn't touch her yet there is nothing between them.

Maliciousness hisses all around her, a familiar note.

She knows what this is.

It's like a song; one of screaming and pain and suffering. She had belonged to it a year ago, and her contribution wasn't lost when she left. She can hear herself in it; the hatred and cold that she'd given to this.

Maybe she'd never stopped giving.

The darkness presses forward and presses on El's shoulder. She whirls around.

"Whoa!" Mike exclaims, throwing his hands up for protection.

El, breathing hard, lowers the hand she'd thrown up in self-defense.

"You okay?" Mike asks concernedly, lowering his arms and reaching for El.

She takes a deep breath and forces a smile onto her face. "Yeah," she says, peering over her shoulder as if the darkness will manifest itself again. "Yeah. I'm fine. Just..."

"Flashback?" Mike suggests, his voice soft.

"Yeah. Flashback."

El allows him to lead her into the AV room, casting one more fearful look over her shoulder into the suspiciously soundless hallway before the door clicks shut.

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## PRESENT

It's not something that Will can explain.

He *knows* he's seen Mike writing it, he really does, and he can

remember it, but it's like watching the memory through a screen, making the images seem fuzzy and grey but they're still *there*.

When he looks at the girl, he can remember her too, for a moment, before his eyes slide away from the photo and he has to concentrate on bringing them back. There she is, grey and smiling at Mike, and whirling around with white eyes, and learning to ride a bike with Mike, and trying Max's skateboard, and concentrating on homework, and then the whole room is grey and there's vines everywhere and someone with short hair is smiling sadly at Will—

"Will!"

Will looks up. Mike's gesturing at him furiously from the end of the block. "Come on, let's go!"

From what he can remember of the girl—this *El*—she'd been a significant member of their lives. It's just that Will can't remember her clearly, and not at all this past week. Come to think of it, this past week *has* been suspiciously blurry.

Will finds that when he's looking away from the picture, the memories he'd summoned up, close enough to see through the wall but not close enough to touch, start to fade away.

When he puts the picture in his pocket, he forgets all about it entirely.

"I'm coming!" he shouts at Mike, grinning, because he'd gotten so caught up in counting his candy he'd not even noticed his friends drifting away from him. His mom would be furious if she were here right now, but his friends had managed to convince her that they'd keep an eye on him the whole time.

They knock on the door to a house. A woman wearing an oversize sweater with blond, curly locks flings it open, beaming at them. Her watery blue eyes are framed with way too much mascara and she's holding a little baby in her arms.

"Oh! You guys have costumes on just like Max!"

"How d'you know Max?" Lucas asks, surly. Surely if this woman is

important in her life, Max would tell him—right?

"She's never said anything about me?" the woman laughs. "She doesn't like me all that much, now does she? Then again, who *does* much like their sister-in-law?"

"Sister-in-law?" they all echo, a bit disoriented. Will feels a little dizzy, like he'd been hit on the head.

"Shut up, Blossom," Max shouts from the upper floor.

"This is where you *live*?" Lucas asks disbelievingly when she bounds down the stairs. The house is large but not overly so, neat with carpets covering the wooden floorboards. The overall theme is 'wood', it would seem, as everything is light brown.

"Well, yeah," Max says, putting her hands on her hips.

Will had always seen her on her skateboard or in her brother's car; it'd never occurred to him that Max has a bed and a home as well. It's like he'd always thought of her as disappearing when they can't see her.

"Why didn't you tell me you have a sister-in-law?" Lucas sputters.

"And a niece," Max mutters, glaring at the child. Then she shrugs. "It never came up. It's not important—*they're* not important." She spits the last words at the blonde woman, who rolls her eyes and switches the baby into her other arm.

"What's her name?" Mike asks, frowning at the baby.

"Who, my sister-in-law? Blossom. I already said so."

"No, the baby."

"Oh. Yeah. Elle."

### 3. The Demon

#### SIX DAYS AGO

El is sorting the boxes neatly. Most of them are simply old stuff, but she's set aside two boxes to look at later. She pulls out an old book from an unsorted and unlabeled box and blows the dust off it, admiring the particles floating through the air for a moment, before opening it. The rustling sends dust towards her and she has to blink to get one speck out of her eye.

The book is filled with different letters written in a cursive look-alike; not exactly cursive but not exactly regular writing either. Like whoever was writing it was writing normally but forgot to take their pen off the paper. Cursive's a pretty way to write, sure, but El never got the hang of reading or writing it perfectly. She hunches over the book and sounds out each letter carefully, trying to figure out what they mean.

"I'll... be... back... soon," El whispers reverently. She doesn't want to touch the letters for fear of smudging the ink, though she knows in the back of her brain that the ink dried long ago. "Love, Jim." The next letter is written with perfect, narrow cursive, and undoubtedly by another person. It's signed with 'Yours, Diane'.

Something crunches outside and El snaps the book shut, her heart suddenly pounding and palms sweating, fingers twitching. She swipes the dust out of the air with her powers and sets the book on the ground as quietly as she can. Feet merely whispers on the ground, El tiptoes over to the wall next to the door. Something is *definitely* moving outside, too loud to be trying to be stealthy, too heavy to be anything but a human or... something else.

The radio screeches and El jumps, swallows the shriek she had almost let out. With her mind, she turns the sound off, but whatever it was outside has definitely heard; it's not moving anymore. El has to stuff her hand in her mouth to keep from sobbing. Mike is preparing his house for the campaign and said he would be over in another hour, and he never comes early without letting her know; he knows how much she hates surprises. Hopper isn't supposed to be back yet, and

all of the other members of the party are packing for the sleepover. Mr. Clarke wasn't supposed to come today because of the campaign. Whatever's out there is *not* supposed to be.

Uncomfortably aware of how hard her heart is pounding in her chest, sure that whatever's outside can hear it, El steps in front of the door and raises her eye to peer through the peephole. Nothing is outside. *Maybe it was just a rabbit*, El tries to tell herself, but it doesn't work. No rabbit makes those noises; like something dragging across the ground, like heels stomping at the same time. Like a person. If there is a person out there, they won't have to walk far to get to the town. They'll leave her in just a minute, or when El sees who they are, she'll tell them where to go. But the bad men aren't here; they'll never be here.

She creeps closer to the radio and turns it up just enough to hear who was trying to contact her, but all she can hear is static. White noise. El takes a deep breath, closes her eyes, and counts to ten, before fiddling with the buttons. The channel she and Hopper normally use is crackly, but he might've just dropped his radio; he's done that before. Or maybe it died, that's happened too. Or maybe it's even just turned off. Sometimes Hopper has to be quiet and he turns it off, and the radio was screeching because something had happened to it. Everything is fine. Everything's *fine*.

Just to be safe, though, El turns the radio down again. After a few moments of trying to stifle her panicked breathing, she turns around and screams before clapping her hand over her mouth and instinctively hardening the air around her.

The boxes are all overturned, pages from the beautiful book fluttering through the air. The door to the cabin is open, swinging on the top hinge but completely ripped off the bottom one. She can't see whatever had done the damage, but it's probably still in the cabin. It could've attacked her while her eyes were closed or her back turned. It could've gone upstairs or into the cellar, it could be hiding behind a sofa. It'd been completely silent—*how?*

El turns on the radio again. It's still crackly, except for the channel she uses with Lucas. "Lucas," El whispers, curling into a ball next to the stand where the radio usually sits. It's too large to sit comfortably

in her lap and heavy, but the adrenaline pumping through El's veins could probably let her hold it for hours.

"Who's this?" a too-loud, too-female voice, practically a scream in the dead silence of the cabin, inquires. El winces.

"Lucas's friend," she says softly. She can feel her pulse fluttering at the base of her neck like something trying to get out. *Thud-thud, thud-thud, thud-thud.* "Is he there?" She's too loud, too loud, she should be completely silent, lock herself in her room—but what if it's in there, hiding? What if there's more than one thing? El hadn't even sensed anything coming, only heard; is she losing her connection to the Upside Down? El would be both relieved and worried if that's the case.

"He left a bit ago," the girl says haughtily. "He's going to Mike's house. Are you Max?"

"No," El says softly, squeezing her eyes shut and turning the radio off. If she's quiet enough, she should be able to hear it again; she'd heard it outside. Sure enough, something is making noise in her room.

El creeps across the room to hers, sticking to the walls as much as she can. She'd feel it if something was trying to crawl through it, and that leaves the empty room in her vision.

When she enters her room, she immediately sees what is making the noise: her SuperComm, sitting on the bed, someone whispering through whichever channel it's on. It's working, though, unlike El's radio, so she tiptoes across the room to get it. She doesn't hear anything else moving, and turns the radio off just to make sure for a moment, to see if she can hear anything else. She didn't hear the door being ripped off its hinges or the book being torn, though, so why would she hear this?

She turns the radio to Hopper's channel. "Hopper?" El asks quietly.

"Yeah, kid, I'm here. What is it? You need a ride to Wheeler's?"

So his radio isn't broken, or dead, or turned off. Maybe it was just turned on again a minute ago, but considering the state of the house,

El finds that unlikely. No, something's wrong, very wrong, and she's scared.

"Something's here," El whispers.

No response, but she knows Hopper's coming to the house. All she has to do is make sure that nothing else is broken—and as soon as she thinks that, something crashes in the cellar. Hopefully Hopper isn't all the way across town, because the way this is going, the house would be up in flames by the time he got here.

El closes her eyes for hardly a second before gripping the SuperComm as hard as she can and striding into the main room, now with papers all around it like snow. She wants to call for Mike so bad, but she doesn't want to ruin the campaign he'd been working on for so long. She can't do that to him, not after they've got some semblance of normality back in their lives. She can't do that to him again, can't have him worrying badly. He shouldn't have to deal with that again.

Who else can El contact? Who else is there? There's Steve, but he's probably at his house, or Nancy, but El can't reach her, or the Byers, but El can't do this to them either. She has to do this herself until Hopper gets here, it would seem.

El slams the doors shut with her mind—all of them. This thing hasn't been here fifteen minutes and she's already sick of its shenanigans. It's not moving in the cellar anymore, and El gives the hole a wide berth as she strides purposefully to the kitchen to grab a knife. The kitchen is spotless, but why would it need to go in there? She wasn't in there until just now.

El still can't sense anything, and it makes her extremely nervous, almost like her powers are being cut off or muffled. Like someone had put a pillow over her face. She should be able to sense whatever it is in here, because it's connected to the Upside Down and El is *most definitely* connected to the Upside Down, so there should have been a connection between them as well. But there's nothing.

She pushes the toaster out of the way to grab the flashlight hidden behind it and grabs a knife out of the knife-block before edging back into the living room. Ripped papers crinkle under El's feet and she

silently mourns the beautiful words she'd only discovered for minutes.

The SuperComm switches itself onto a different channel and someone starts to whisper through it. El remembers that this was the same channel and noise it was on while on her bed.

The noise is too crackly, though, for her to hear clearly. "Hind oo," it seems to be saying. El frowns. "Be!"

El turns the volume up a bit more. An explosion-sound comes from the radio, way too loud to be natural, and it makes her stumble.

"ELEVEN, LOOK UP!" the person screams through the radio. El ducks and twists, staring at the ceiling, bringing her arms up to shield her face.

And she screams.

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"Late," Mike mutters, checking his watch for the fourth time in the last twenty seconds. "Late, late, late." His mom's not back from the supermarket, so he can't leave the house because he's babysitting Holly, even though he's going to be late to the cabin now. Sure, Karen's only five minutes late *right now*, but she was probably stopped by someone to talk, which means she might be back by tomorrow. Maybe. And El can't walk to his house alone; Hopper's forbidden it and frankly, she's too scared of what could be hiding in the shadows to break that rule. And now she's probably getting ready for him to come over and she'll start worrying when he's late. This is why Mike needs to get his family SuperComms. So he can yell at them even while they're not at home.

Someone roars by his house, going too fast for Mike to catch who it is, which is impressive. Most cars Mike's neighbors have aren't very fast. It must be Billy, off to another high school party.

"Mike!"

Mike frowns. That wasn't Holly, but who else could it have been? It nearly sounded like El, but she's not coming here first.

"I'm home!" Karen shouts, slamming the door, and Mike smiles.

"Okay, see you!" he shouts, brushing past her and jumping on his bike nearly supernaturally fast.

When he gets to the woods, his stomach drops and he knows something is very, *very* wrong. Hopper's car looks like it had crashed, or maybe just been parked in a hurry, on the side of the road. The man isn't there.

Mike leaves his bike by the car, suddenly very aware of how dark the woods are at dusk. He hadn't thought to bring a flashlight or even his SuperComm. Then he looks back at Hopper's car, parked and abandoned, and he starts to run through the woods. He only knows of one thing that could get Hopper to treat his car that way: *El getting hurt.*

It doesn't take Mike long to get to the cabin, but he can hear it way before he gets there. Two voices are screaming at each other, voices lost in the slurring fury-screeches. Mike skids into the clearing, nearly falling over a stray log, and has to blink multiple times when he sees the scene in front of him. Hopper is standing between two small figures screaming obscenities at each other. He knows one of the girls very well, but the second is both a stranger and familiar to him.

In unison, all three people twist to look at him and he flushes. "I saw the car and I thought—" he stops himself and shakes his head. "What's going on?"

"I got a panicked call from El saying that something was here," Hopper growls, "but when I get here all that's here is two girls screaming at each other."

"She was using her powers to freak me out," El says stubbornly, crossing her arms and glaring at the other person. Mike does a double take and looks at the girl closer.

"Wait—*Thirteen?* What are you doing here?"

The other experiment gives him a sarcastic wave with her fingers. "Long time no see, Mike. Call me Lilith, please. And I don't know. I

sort of *had* to come, you know?"

"No," El spits. "I *don't*."

"El." Mike touches her arm gently. He hasn't seen her act this way since Max, nearly eleven months ago. It's a little bit scary, especially when she shrugs him off. Lilith smirks at him for a moment before turning around and striding into the cabin.

"El and I can share a room!" she shouts.

"You and a *rabbit* can share the *forest!*" El yells, striding into the cabin. Mike has never heard her yell before. He's heard her scream, yes, but never yell at someone.

He and Hopper share a look before also heading into the cabin. The living room is coated with ripped papers, a nasty smell hangs in the air, and the door is hanging on by one hinge. "Jesus Christ," Hop murmurs, looking at the mess. "Eleven, what the hell happened?"

"*She* the hell happened!" El yells angrily, glaring at the door to her room. It shudders; Lilith is obviously doing all that she can to keep it closed.

"Language," Hopper scolds. "Thirteen, get out of her room."

"Can I sleep at Mike's, then?" Lilith asks smugly, opening the door.

El slams it shut with her powers.

"When are you leaving?" Mike yell over the shouts and door slamming.

"Whenever I can!" Lilith yells over El's shouted, "Now!"

"ENOUGH!" Hopper bellows. Everything freezes for a moment before the door slowly creaks open. Lilith's hair is frazzled but the smirk is still the same. "What do you mean, 'whenever I can?'" he asks.

Lilith shrugs and starts to pick at her fingernails. "Can't leave *now*."

"And why not?" the cop asks aggressively.

"Because..." Lilith drags the word out. "It won't let me."

"Shut up," Eleven says viciously. "Shut up and go away. It's finally gone. You're just trying to make us nervous, make drama. I would have sensed it."

Lilith shrugs nonchalantly. "Believe what you want to."

"I will." El grabs Mike's hand. "I'm going to Mike's. If you follow us, I *will* kill you," she vows before dragging Mike out of the cabin, him stumbling as he tries to keep up for the first time ever (most of the time it's her trying to keep up with his long legs). The bike ride to his house is tense and silent and when they get to Mike's house, El walks in before Mike can put his bike away. All he can do is wonder what he did wrong.

"Dude, did you wash off your bike yet?" Dustin asks once he walks downstairs. "If you leave that mud on it to dry it'll be a ton harder to wash off later."

Mike raises an eyebrow at him.

"El said you guys were late because you crashed into a mud puddle," Lucas explains.

"Oh." Mike tries to think up a lie quickly. "Yeah. I was just wondering how you knew. Yeah. I washed it off and changed. Which is why El came in earlier than me."

"I bet she would've liked to see you change," Dustin whispers loudly while Will squints at Mike. Mike avoids his gaze to look at El, who is in turn avoiding *his* gaze.

"Dude," Lucas says with disgust.

"I bet Dustin would like to see Ms. Walker change!" Max cackles.

"*Dude!*" Dustin flushes. "Lucas, control your girlfriend!"

"If I could, my life would be so much easier," Lucas says mournfully and then yelps when Max hits him with an open palm. "Dude!"

"Dude!" Max mocks.

El smiles quietly, quite a change from the angry, yelling girl she'd been half an hour ago. After a moment of trying to get her to meet his eyes, Mike just shakes his head at his friends and sets the game board on the table. "So, continuing with the story..."

Three boxes of pizza, two two-liter bottles of soda, and three spills by Dustin and saved by El later, Max is rolling for an attack. "Four," Lucas groans, leaning back in his chair. "El, it's up to you."

With a characteristically serious look on her face, El reaches over to grab the dice. She shakes it in her hand for a moment before tossing it onto the table. It tumbles for a moment before starting to spin on one of its points. Dustin lets out a whoop of excitement. Mike watches it continue to spin on that one point, unable to tear his eyes away.

"I bet she's doing it," Max murmurs to Lucas.

"Am not," El says back, hypnotized by the perfect spins the dice is making just like Mike. "Look, it's wobbling now." And it is.

Then the table's surface turns into a hole and it falls down into it before the edges of the hole snap shut like jaws. Will's Mage character wobbles for a second before tipping over.

Max shoves her chair away from the table so hard it tips over. Dustin is yelling "Oh my God!" repeatedly while clutching an empty soda bottle in his hands and Lucas drags Max away from the table as fast as he can. Mike had sprung up, sending his chair sprawling. Only Will and Eleven hadn't reacted. They both hadn't even twitched, both staring at the table unblinkingly. The group is silent for a long moment, El picking Will's character up manually.

"El?" Max asks in a small voice, breaking the silence. "That was you, right?"

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## PRESENT

"Elle," Will repeats dumbly.

"Yeah. Elle." Max shoots him a curious look. "Something wrong, Byers?"

"No," Will says. He wants to say that that name is wrong, that it's someone else's, but it's not someone else's. He doesn't know anyone with the name 'Elle' but—his hand automatically moves to his pant pocket and the picture crinkles under his fingers. He doesn't know anyone by the name of 'Elle' but he does know someone else by the name of 'El'. Apparently. Even though he can barely remember her and remember her perfectly at the same time.

When he blinks a shimmering apparition appears behind Max—a small figure wearing ripped jeans and a leather jacket, curly brown hair poking out behind a creepy, grinning clown mask. But that's just because he's seen people running around as clowns tonight, right? It was just his imagination.

"Come on, guys," Max says quickly, pulling Lucas away from her house. "She's not even handing out good candy anyways."

---

"Eleven." Kali stands in the doorway to El's room, both their masks in her hand. El can hear her distaste at the name, how she had hesitated before saying it, but she doesn't like the name Jane. She can't use that one when it seems like a betrayal to—El lets out a breath, hissed between her teeth. It seems like a betrayal to her friends; after the'd given her so much, she can at least keep the gifts.

El looks up quickly. "You found him?"

"One did. He's in the town, scouting around. She saw him following your friends for a while before starting to talk to your policeman. She says it looks like he knows they don't remember anything."

Eleven shivers, shrugging on her jacket, before standing up. "I'm not going back."

"I thought as much," Kali sighs. "As long as One's watching him, we don't have to go back, but we can't risk losing him again. But tonight we have a different target."

Eleven nods, her hand straying back to the gun tucked into her waistband. It's uncomfortable when she's sitting, but she feels safer with it there against her skin. It takes much less effort to shoot someone than to use her powers, and the sight of a gun will scare someone much more than a small girl with fluffy brown curls. She takes the mask from her sister's outstretched hand and puts it on the top of her head but doesn't slide it down.

"What would you do if he hurt your friends? Would you go back then?" Kali asks, her eyes scanning El's face.

El slips the clown mask over her face, knowing what her sister is trying to do. Some secrets need to stay so. "Going back could hurt them worse."

"Do you get the feeling that this is it?" Kali asks quietly. "He's back and that shadow monster..."

"It's the climax of... whatever this is," Lilith says from the doorway. Her black hair is pulled back into a harsh ponytail. El jumps and takes the mask off her face.

"You think?" she murmurs.

"Stage one: the Demogorgon. Stage two: the Upside Down. Stage three: last week."

"Stage one is actually the lab," El says thoughtfully.

"Stage one: the lab. Stage two: the Demogorgon. Stage three: the Upside Down. Stage four: last week."

"And now we're in stage five," Kali murmurs. "Stage one and stage four at the same time."

"One plus four equals five," El notes.

Lilith nods smartly before asking, "Who's our target for tonight?"